

CHAPTER FIVE

FATHER KIRCHER'S RETREATS

ATHANASIUS KIRCHER TRAVELED CONSTANTLY. IT IS TRUE THAT AFTER THE young German Jesuit arrived in Rome in November 1633 he would rarely leave the city again, but for the next forty years, and from within the walls of the Collegio Romano, he would draw up a series of fantastic itineraries in more than thirty published books. Kircher's boundless curiosity, combined with generous patrons and resourceful publishers, enabled him to invite his readers on imaginary journeys to the remotest places and remotest pasts, based on incoming Jesuit reports, letters, books, hearsay, and even on his own revelations, which he synthesized in visually stunning publications, lavishly illustrated by artists and engravers acting more or less on his instructions. Thus, for example, his *China Illustrata* (*China Illustrated*) from 1667 took the reader eastward through India and the Chinese provinces while Kircher explained the languages, cults, and customs, as well as the natural and architectural wonders of places he had never seen.¹ He also traveled to legendary archaic realms, visiting the construction site of the biblical ark in *Arca Noë* (*the Ark of Noah*), published in 1675, and the great vanished cities of Niniveh and Babylon in *Turris Babel* (*Tower of Babel*) from 1679. In *Mundus Subterraneus* (*Subterranean World*) of 1665 he journeyed to the Earth's core, tracing the passageways of fire and water that bisected the underworld into two systems.² He journeyed to the brink of heaven, glimpsing Giordano Bruno's infinite universe, in a cosmological treatise cautiously guised as a dream titled *Itinerarium Exstaticum Coeleste* (*Ecstatic Heavenly Journey*) and published in 1656.³

And he traveled to Tivoli, which was no great ordeal perhaps. Still one would be gravely mistaken to think that the short distance and familiar surroundings of the hill town east of Rome prevented the Jesuit Father from also revealing secrets and higher truths there. The town, which everyone in Rome could see for themselves on clear days, became in Kircher's account as mythical and remote as Babylon.

It is easy to get lost in, and to be misled by, the array of topics on which Kircher wrote. Magnetism, geology, medicine, hieroglyphs, linguistics, astronomy, biology, and archaeology are just a few of the subjects he covered, but it is a diversity that he often was able to unify in one simple idea: the omnipotence of the Christian God. The more curious the phenomenon, the more resoundingly were God's capabilities proven, and the Jesuit's tireless exploration of new territories was fueled by a will to show how the divine rays flooded even the most unknown and unthought of parts of Creation. Ignoring the advice from early mentors to discipline his fertile mind and then the criticism from his contemporaries, Kircher unfailingly came to the conclusion that God reigned supreme. It was a governance manifest on all levels of existence, of which he found evidence in the grandest scheme and the tiniest pattern in nature.

No single study has been devoted to Kircher's view of ancient Rome, and one would expect that his preoccupation with antiquity and architecture referred ultimately to a more tangible domain than theology and biblical history. Yet, that is not the case.

Kircher saw himself as the most meticulous scientist, and he planned toward the end of his life to publish a collection of experiments that he claimed to have carried out during a thirty-year period. He wrote to his publisher that the work, *Physiologia Kircheriana*, "contains more than 300 experiments in things of nature."⁴ Yet, the results Kircher reported were often based on experiments that no one else had been able to witness. They involved plants that inclined by magnetic force to the sun and the moon, and music that was able to extract the poison of the Tarantula spiders from infected bodies.⁵ Flying turtles and stones imprinted with Christian crosses were among the strange tales reported back to Rome and put in print by Kircher, almost undigested.⁶ Measurements and tabulations lent an air of verisimilitude to speculations such as the one in *Turris Babel* where he famously refuted the idea that the biblical tower reached the moon, claimed by some, because that height combined with its weight would have tilted the Earth out of balance.⁷ The examples are countless, and whereas he was commended for his extensive knowledge and "great industry," Father Kircher also was occasionally met with laughter and disbelief by contemporaries, such as Descartes, who dismissed him as a charlatan.⁸

Empirical investigation and systematic observation were elements of an approach that Kircher liked to flag more than rigorously apply, because he often knew the answer already – God’s might. His aim, if that can be said about the practicing of science, was less to expel divine truths and miraculous manifestations from discourse than to ground those things as “results” and “discoveries” in the scientific language of the day. It is wrong to think that Kircher’s labyrinthine ways – his “art of dissembling” as Ingrid D. Rowland’s calls it – were designed solely to cover up a lack of evidence, because they also distracted censors from sensitive topics of the day⁹: When Kircher arrived in Rome, Galileo sat silenced by law in Florence precisely for having expressed too clearly truths that probably every scientist in their hearts agreed on, but that meant trouble if openly voiced. Kircher’s contribution to science has indeed been uncovered in important works by Daniel Stolzenberg, Harry B. Evans, Ingrid D. Rowland, and others: Egyptology, topography, and geology are fields within which Kircher intentionally or unintentionally left a mark also from a modern scientific standpoint and where he added nuance to modern notions of what the sciences were about in the seventeenth century. And yet one should not be blind to his will to find spiritual oneness behind it all, which underlies his efforts and makes his oeuvre stand out like an allegory of science more than as a catalog of its various methodologies and practices.

Above all, the fantastic world of Kircher not only profited from the accomplished bookmaking of his day but was also to a great extent invented by it: The impressive formats, novel fonts, and complex charts and diagrams displayed the state of the art of book production and gave the Society of Jesus wide publicity, which is probably why it turned a blind eye to some of Kircher’s more problematic theological points. The extravagantly illustrated books by Kircher published by Vitale Mascardi in Rome and later by Jansson and Weyerstraet in Amsterdam did not simply record what was real but also produced new realities, unimaginable at an earlier stage in the development of printing and no doubt challenging the author to keep up with the trade’s rapidly expanding possibilities. These publications – covering every possible topic, often scheduled years in advance, and distributed worldwide – delimit a “second” Creation confined to the realm of printing and with Kircher as the demiurge.¹⁰ But whatever ideas he indulged in – from flying turtles to stones that could extract poison – the German professor never deliberately deceived his audience; he wished to show that things that seemed fantastic and improbable were simply part of a design known only to God – and to Kircher, of course. Just as he throughout his oeuvre strived to make separate realities blend, as if by alchemical formula, he also aimed to merge antiquity and the contemporary, with ruins as boiling pots, from which materialized yet another proof of God’s infinite power – in architectural form.

ATHANASIUS KIRCHER AND ARCHITECTURAL PRINTS

Lazio is the region that comprises Rome and its surroundings, bordering on Campagna in the south and Tuscany in the north. Even this very familiar realm – far from both the subterranean world and legendary Niniveh – emerges in Kircher's text and images at times almost unrecognizable. Tellingly, a previous manuscript on Tuscany, the *Iter Hetruscam* (*Etruscan Journey*) completed in 1660, never reached the printing press because the censors found this apparently straightforward survey of the neighboring province of Lazio riddled with errors and inventions.¹¹ With a divinely coherent world already in place, and book production ticking like clockwork, there would be no particular need for him to go to the places he described. *Latium* of 1671 *did* pass the censors, although it met with critical comments from its readers and shows Kircher's desire to reveal the hidden dimensions also of the region around Rome.¹² Harry B. Evans has written on Kircher as topographer in *Latium*, and indeed Kircher's text unfolds as a sort of rambling travel account conveyed with the enthusiasm of a true explorer. Caves, tombs, and sanctuaries are among the “discoveries” Kircher literally stumbles over and romanticizes in text and image, creating a picture of an inaccessibly rocky and overgrown Lazio steeped in mysteries, with the occasional glimpse of a ruin. But then – on the hillsides of Tivoli – and spread over a pair of double folios in *Latium* – two ancient villas appear, reconstructed in Kircher's book to the form they once had, as if by a process not unlike the “experiment” in which he resurrected a plant from its own ashes, but conducted in archaeology.¹³ The two spectacular visions represent what Kircher believed were the ancient villas of Maecenas and Quintilius Varus. The remains in Tivoli were still visible, but the highly creative interpretations, dismissed by scholars as both “fanciful” and “imaginative,” mark the continuation and arguably also the culmination of the rhetorical antiquarianism of the Baroque.¹⁴

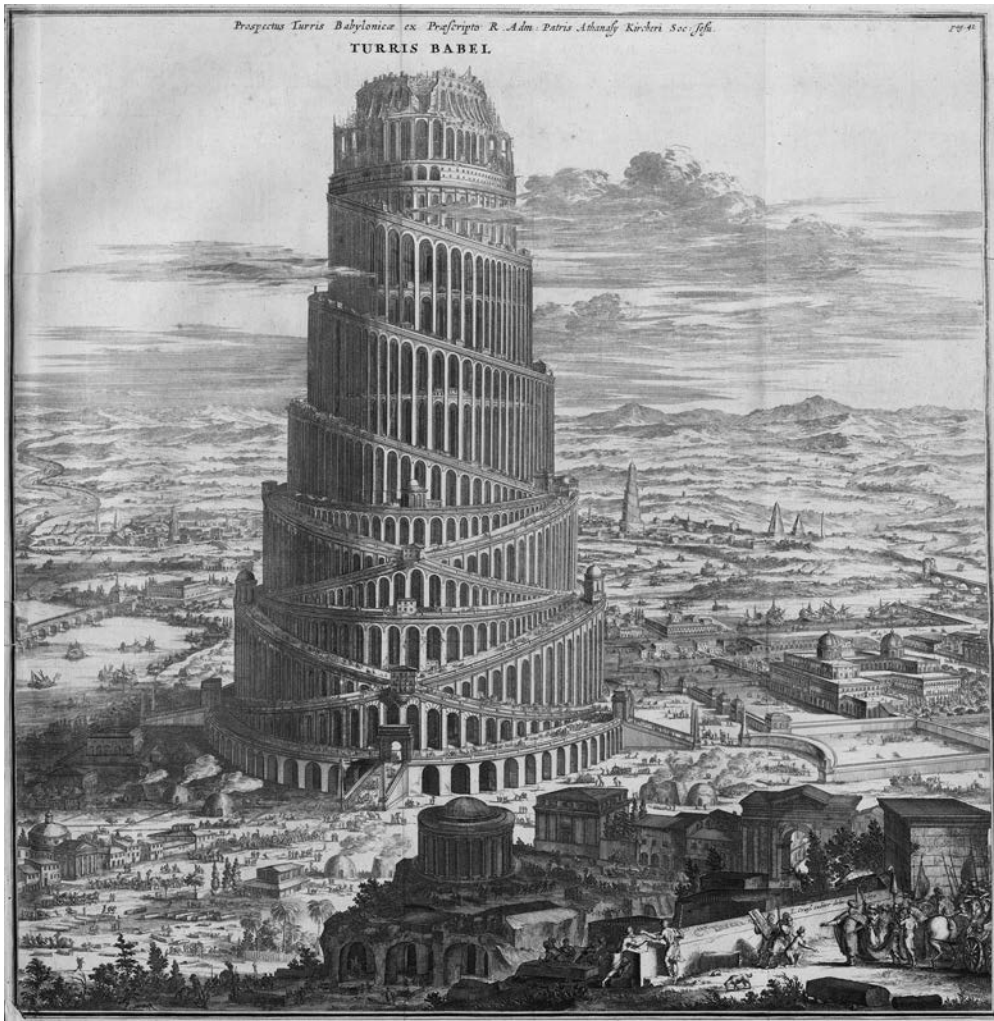
At the onset the villa reconstructions in *Latium* already invalidate an approach to Kircher based on modern distinctions among “archaeologist,” “architect,” and “Jesuit-scholar.” Like Lauro before him, Athanasius the antiquarian relied minimally on the investigation of ruins and instead on ideals of erudition, the hunt for patrons, and the propagation of faith. The essentials of ancient architecture, for both of them, emerged more in the light of divine revelation than through archaeological excavation. In addition, the prolific German could not disappoint a pan-European audience expecting sensational news, even from Lazio. In a letter dated June 24, 1670 Kircher writes, “I have already my works at the press of Jansson of which the first is *Latium*, or on the antiquities of the plains of Lazio, in which a multitude of varied illustrations can be seen.”¹⁵ But he seems to have had the idea for such a book since at least 1661, in which year he traveled far and wide in the area around Rome to investigate monuments

of antiquity.¹⁶ And, in spite of the book's air of having resulted from a simple stroll in the countryside, the manuscript itself took a detour to Protestant Europe and to the publishing house of Johannes Jansson van Waesberge and the heirs of Elizaëus Weyerstraet in Amsterdam, where it was richly illustrated and published in folio format in a tour de force publication that was anything but simple.

Latium is dedicated to Pope Clement X and contains five books, each consisting of several parts devoted to different areas of Lazio – starting with Albano, Ariccia, and Nemi and proceeding through Palestrina, Tivoli, and other places before ending up by the Pontine marshes near the coast of Rome. The parts are divided into chapters that deal not only with the geography of the locations but equally with topographical, historical, biographical, and archaeological details connected with them. Kircher even writes on topics such as hydraulics and botany. For example, in his text on Tivoli, he recounts first the history and origin of the town; then the variety of villas, ancient and new, as well as other structures; and finally the “works of nature” that could be seen in the territory.¹⁷ This all-encompassing ideal is equally reflected in the range of illustrations. The forty-five engravings in *Latium* include images of coins, mosaics, sculptures, mechanical devices such as watermills, topographical maps, and landscape views. The architectural images show ancient monuments as well as representations of more or less contemporary structures, such as the Villa d'Este and the view of the town of Frascati. Buildings are presented in plans, views, elevations, and topographical surveys, and ancient architecture is shown as ruins and – as I proceed to analyze – in the form of reconstructions.

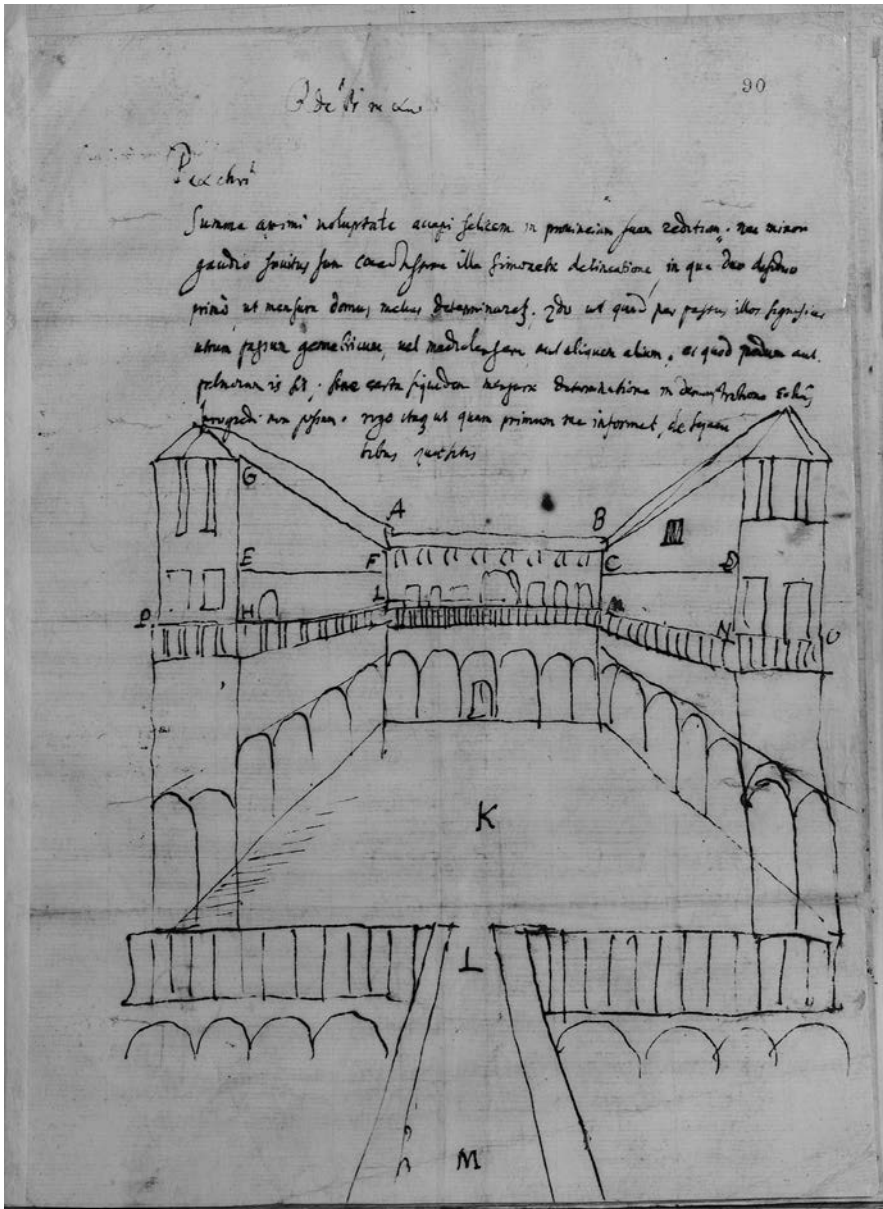
But, if there were one field under the sun – or, for that matter, above it – that Kircher did not try his hand at, it was engraving. On that score Lauro and Kircher were antiquarians on very different terms; there was a great distance between the printmaker and the polymath, between Lauro's studio and Kircher's *wunderkammer* – the museum famously created inside the Collegio Romano that contained rarities, collectibles, and inventions of his own making.¹⁸

The illustrations in Kircher's books were, of course initially decided on and ultimately approved by him, although the extent of his involvement remains obscure in most cases.¹⁹ On the one hand, evidence exists of architectural images made to order by the German. The famous and extravagant depiction in *Tower of Babel* from 1679 of the Babylonian tower, rising to the sky on vast arches, is an example of an architectural mirage that no one in the seventeenth century had seen, of course, but that came out from the Dutch printing press in a more detailed and convincing form than most actual standing monuments probably would. Kircher's tower is an amalgam of wild speculation and stunning realism (Fig. 79). But the cost and complexity of producing it reflect a trade that has moved far beyond the simple one-man enterprise that Lauro's work represents. In contrast to the images in *Antiquae Urbis Splendor*,



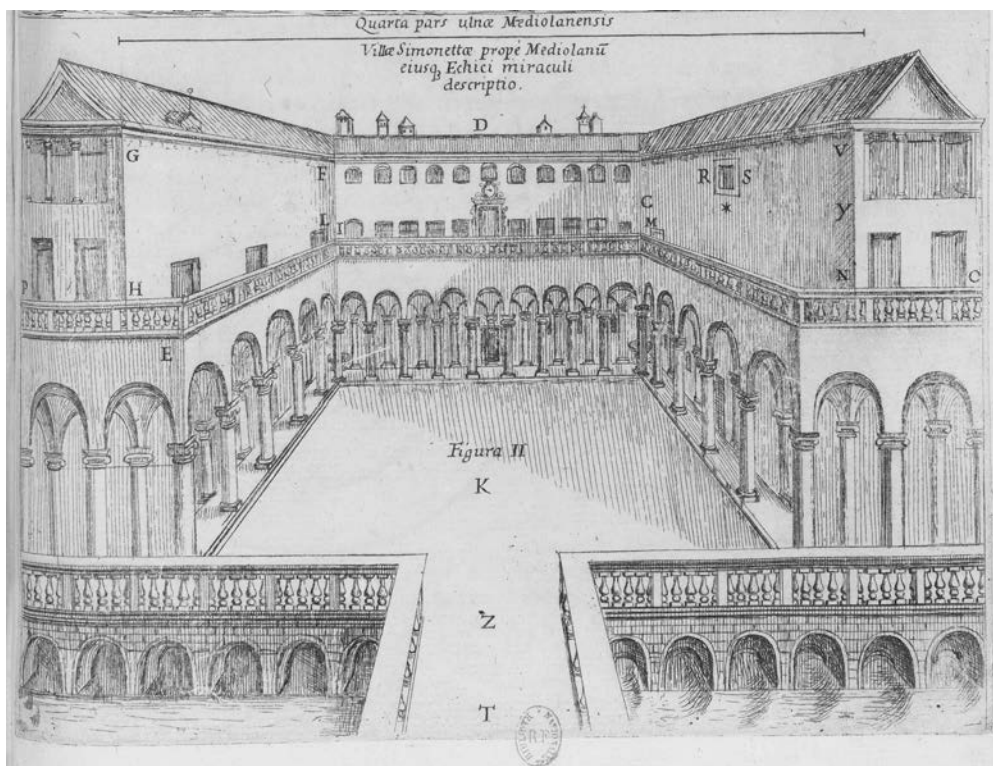
79. Conraet Decker and Lievin Cruyl, Tower of Babylon, 1670. Illustration in Athanasius Kircher's *Turris Babel* (Amsterdam, 1679), p. 41. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, ARS Fol-T-356.

the many signatures on Kircher's plate introduce new functions and highlight the independent status of those involved in making it: The title of the image reads "Prospectus Turre Babylonice ex Praescriptio R. Adm. Patris Athanasij Kircheri Soc. Jesu." – in other words, made by order of Kircher. The engraving is signed by both Coenraet Decker (who probably did the drawing) and the Flemish Lievin Cruyl who incised the plate.²⁰ "Ex praescriptio," however, is a key phrase, and introduces a novel function in the transmittance of ancient, vanished buildings. For what would a "prescription" from Kircher actually look like? This question is important in the attempt to establish the authorship of images that, after all and to this day, mark the apogee of Baroque architectural imagination.



80. Athanasius Kircher, architectural sketch, 1636–48. Pen drawing in a letter draft. Archivio Pontificia Università Gregoriana (APUG) 561, fol. 90r.

What appears to be the only surviving architectural drawing undoubtedly by Kircher is found among the part of his correspondence that is kept by the Archivio Pontificia Università Gregoriana (APUG) in Rome. The sketch is previously unpublished and appears as an illustration in a letter drafted in Latin by Kircher sometime between 1636 and 1648 (Fig. 80).²¹ It is a hastily drawn sketch of a structure that contains a courtyard surrounded on three sides by a colonnade with additional stories above. Balustrades, doors, and windows



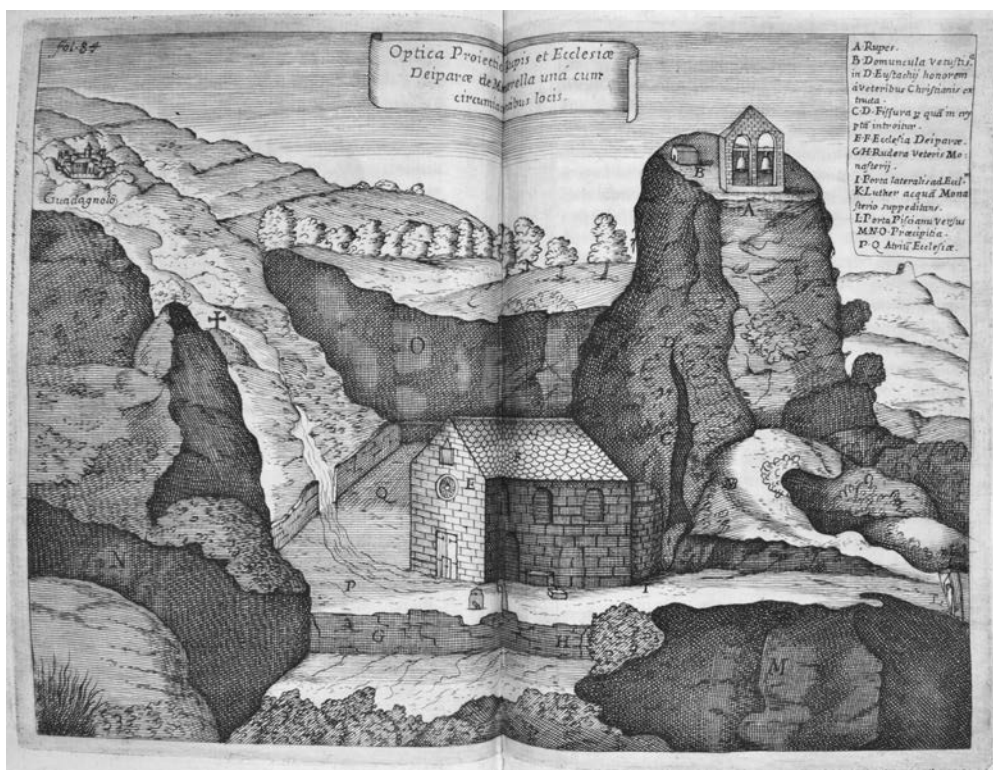
81. Athanasius Kircher, Villa Simonetta near Milan, *Musurgia Universalis* (Rome, 1650), folio between pp. 282 & 283, detail. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, RES-V-2803.

appear too. The strong and consistent perspective in particular reflects Kircher's skill in architectural representation; that the drawing is a "prescription" is evident from the text that says that Kircher wants prints to be made from it. In fact the image reappears in his *Musurgia Universalis* (On Universal Music) published in 1650 in an engraving that identifies the building as Villa Simonetta near Milan (Fig. 81). The villa had come to Kircher's attention because the architecture displayed some remarkable acoustic effects: Anyone who yelled from a specific window high up on one of the walls would hear a series of twenty-four echoes reverberating across the courtyard. But Kircher did not travel to Milan himself to verify the phenomenon. Instead he sent a fellow Jesuit.²² So, as far as Kircher was concerned, Lombardy was as remote as China, and its buildings potentially as ideal as anything he might interpret from a Jesuit travel report. With an eye to his architectural prints at large, what this only surviving sketch confusingly tells us is that buildings standing tall and firm might spring from his own drafts although he himself never had seen them.

In contrast, places that Kircher unquestionably visited were depicted in remarkably simple illustrations: On one of his outings in the eastern parts of Lazio he accidentally came on the remains of the sanctuary of S. Maria in

Mentorella, which he soon made the subject of a separate book titled *Historia Eustachio-Mariana* of 1665. The church was erected on the spot where Saint Eustace, a Roman soldier in the second century AD, was believed to have been converted. Greatly taken by the inaccessible site, Kircher included in the book a plan, a perspective, and a view of the interior of the sanctuary, as well as illustrations of various art objects connected to the site (Fig. 82). Compared to the lavish, richly detailed engravings in the style of the Tower of Babylon, these prints, or rather the designs on which they were based, are coarse and naive and may rest on visual ideas that are basic enough to have been sketched in situ by the Jesuit Father. Still, it is wise to remember that the art of engraving, as the other visual arts at the time, was rhetorical even on the level of technique. More specifically, the difference in style could have been carefully planned to match the moral content of the images. For the devout Jesuit, the Tower of Babylon would symbolize the pride of man, a vice illustrated by means of an intentionally lavish and showy style of depiction. In contrast, the sanctuary of S. Maria, “which breathes the air of pious antiquity,” in Kircher’s words, encouraged modest renderings, deprived of minute details and grandiose scope – a humble homage to a Christian saint, manifesting in print the ideal of the early Christian revival at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

None of the engravings in *Latium* testify to the intriguing collaboration that resulted in the Tower of Babylon print or in the series of Egyptian monuments illustrating *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* drawn by the Polish architect Tito Livio Buratini (Tytus Liwiusz Boratyni).²³ Only a few are signed, such as the fine frontispiece by Romeyn de Hooghe and the antique relief incised by Giovanni Battista Galestruzzi and dated 1668.²⁴ Likewise, Agapito Bernardini, a local of Palestrina, signed the illustrations of artworks and engraved views of that town.²⁵ In the first chapter I mentioned that only once in *Latium* does Kircher commit his own name to a print as its “author.” Thus the role that Lauro so proudly publicized, the Jesuit Kircher modestly put down only on a topographical map of Lazio’s coastline. Clearly, Kircher’s fantasy had its limits after all, at least when it came to drafting his visions, because a large part of the book’s illustrations are borrowed from other publications. Like *Antiquae Urbis Splendor*, *Latium* recirculated images by earlier authors, including Étienne Dupérac, Daniele Stoopendahl, and Matteo Greuter. Prints of reconstructed monuments included replicas of Francesco Contini’s plan of Hadrian’s villa and Domenico Castelli’s engravings of the Temple of Fortuna in Palestrina conceived by Pietro da Cortona. But the two spectacular villa reconstructions still remain a mystery. The architecture in both is solidly Italian, manifesting the style and confidence of the Roman High Baroque, whereas the incising betrays a Dutch glee in the precision and detailing, and no signature or date can help us to identify their origin. No “prescriptive” drawings by Kircher survive for these designs, and yet, as I return to later, his hand in both is



82. Athanasius Kircher, Sanctuary of S. Maria in Mentorella, *Historia Eustachio-Mariana* (Rome, 1665), folio between pp. 83 & 84. British School at Rome Library, 489.9.EUS.1.1.

almost certain, given the clear, even personal, messages that these reinventions ingeniously convey.

Perhaps it is only to be expected that for these antiques Lauro's *Antiquae Urbis Splendor* came to Kircher's aid. There he found not only a repertory of welcome models, such as the reconstruction on which he based the *Villa of Quintilius Varus*, but also a method of recombining architectural evidence. Like Lauro, the Jesuit Father quickly learned how to transcend mere plagiarism and transform borrowed models into new meaningful forms. The fact is, however, that Kircher did it even better.

KIRCHER RESTAURATOR

Kircher's interest in archaeology and architecture peaked when he was faced with the challenge of reconstructing an actual building. Even within the fictionalized setting of ancient Babylon, the Jesuit's practical knowledge of architecture surfaces as he impressively lists the skills he thought necessary for King Nimrod to have had in administrating the building of the tower. He also lists the responsibilities of a master architect, such as the delegation of labor to

craftsmen and masons, the transportation of material, and the construction of stoves for the burning of bricks.²⁶ Kircher also gives surprisingly practical solutions to problems concerning the measuring of heights and distances in his *Tariffa Kircheriana*, published in 1679, also with regard to buildings.²⁷ His go at practical architecture, however, boils down to a single project: S. Maria in Mentorella. His book on the place, the *Historia Eustachio-Mariana*, paints a picture of Kircher on his knees carefully measuring first the sanctuary's exterior and then its interior, in width and length, before planning its rebuilding.²⁸ The sanctuary puts to the test his work as a restorer in actual fact. The question is how tangible Kircher's restoration in the end really was.

The affection he held for this sanctuary owes much to his feeling of having discovered it. Stumbling over the site, while roaming the eastern parts of Lazio, was a high point in more than one sense, as the church and its monastery occupy a rock almost 1,200 meters above sea level. His description of seeing the shrine reflects how he must have imagined Saint Eustace, on the same spot, beholding the Holy Cross between the horns of a stag in a vision that so stunned the Roman soldier that it led to his instant conversion (Fig. 83). Over the years Kircher came to regard Mentorella almost as his private retreat: He instituted the feast of Saint Mary (still celebrated), and in his old age he spent the summers there, escaping a stiflingly hot Rome and doing experiments with hot air balloons and megaphones in the countryside around the quiet spot.²⁹ From all over Europe he raised money for its restoration and even established a fund of 70 scudi each year for its upkeep.³⁰ As a final token of devotion, Athanasius left his heart at Mentorella – literally: His will instructed that it be buried under the main altar, a fact recorded on a plaque in the floor.

In its present form, the main features of the church can be dated to the first half of the thirteenth century.³¹ An early scholar of the place, Attilio Rossi, bases this dating first on a letter by the Tiburtine bishop Clarus from this period, which gives a description of the church, and second on stylistic evidence – in particular, Gothic features such as the pointed arches in the nave and on the exterior.³² Before the present structure, however, an earlier one most likely existed. Its origin is impossible to date precisely, because there are hardly any physical traces of it left. The first actual mention of a church on this site dates from the year 984; Giuseppe Cascioli, daringly, even attempted to date the first church to around 596, based on a privilege of Gregory the Great, which later has been regarded as a fake.³³ None of these dates, however, was early enough for Athanasius Kircher.

The medieval structure was very much intact when Kircher got there, and the necessary work consisted mainly of repairs. Already in 1581, a deputy of Pope Gregory XIII had found the church in a derelict state and requested repairs of the roof, the walls, and the floor.³⁴ But no work had been carried out when Kircher arrived eighty years later, as he noted the same deteriorations.³⁵ From Kircher's correspondence, his *Historia Eustachio-Mariana* and other books,



83. Athanasius Kircher, the conversion of Saint Eustace. Engraved frontispiece to *Historia Eustachio-Mariana* (Rome, 1665). British School at Rome, 489.9.EUS.1.1.

and inscriptions on the site, we get an idea of what was done. He marshalled an impressive number of sponsors to help pay for the restorations, and from 1661 donations were steadily amassed.³⁶ With these funds, work began and the roof, the walls, the floor, and the statue of the Holy Virgin were repaired and adorned. Some new structures were put up at Mentorella at this time as well, including a “Scala Santa” consisting of seventy-eight steps that offered a safe but steep ascent to the summit of a rock adjacent to the church. On

top of this rock stood a small chapel dedicated to Saint Eustace, restored in the 1660s, and painted on the inside with murals showing scenes from the saint's life.³⁷ In addition to these works, five additional habitations were built for pilgrims and for the custodian, Kircher informs us, but neither he nor later commentators mention where these habitations were located. They would in any case have had to be placed in the monastery part and consequently created by repartitioning within structures already there, rather than from constructing new buildings altogether.³⁸ In other words, and in spite of much activity, Mentorella offered the Jesuit no occasion for any large-scale rebuilding.

Kircher was the initiator, the administrator, the *sine qua non* of the restoration works at Mentorella, but considering the comparatively minor undertakings on the site and the scant evidence of his actual contribution, the extent to which he was celebrated for its restoration is surprising: An undated plaque by the main altar reads "Athanasius Kircher Soc. Iesu Templi Huius Restaurator" – Kircher as the restorer of the church. In 1690, the bishop of Tivoli, Monsignor Fonseca, wrote about Kircher's work on S. Maria that he "had restored it to its former glory ("pristinum splendorem").³⁹ Even the early twentieth-century historian Giuseppe Cascioli grants Kircher a large due: "But for this sanctuary, God prepared a great restorer, who was to be the celebrated P. Athanasio Kircher." – Kircher is hailed as one sent by God.⁴⁰

Such praise points to achievements beyond the modest rebuilding, and in fact it can be said that Kircher conducted his efforts on two levels: He reconstructed the physical building (to an extent), but at the same time he constructed the idea of its historical origin. In claiming that the Emperor Constantine had erected the original church, Kircher created a captivating *concetto* that had lasting success. In 1855, Fabio Gori noted that S. Maria in Mentorella was built by Constantine,⁴¹ and an unsigned letter from the 1870s refers to the church as "un antico monumento di tempo di Constantino."⁴² Even today Kircher's affirmation stands strong. A booklet on Mentorella from 1981 names it as "the oldest sanctuary in Italy" and refers to its Constantine origin.⁴³

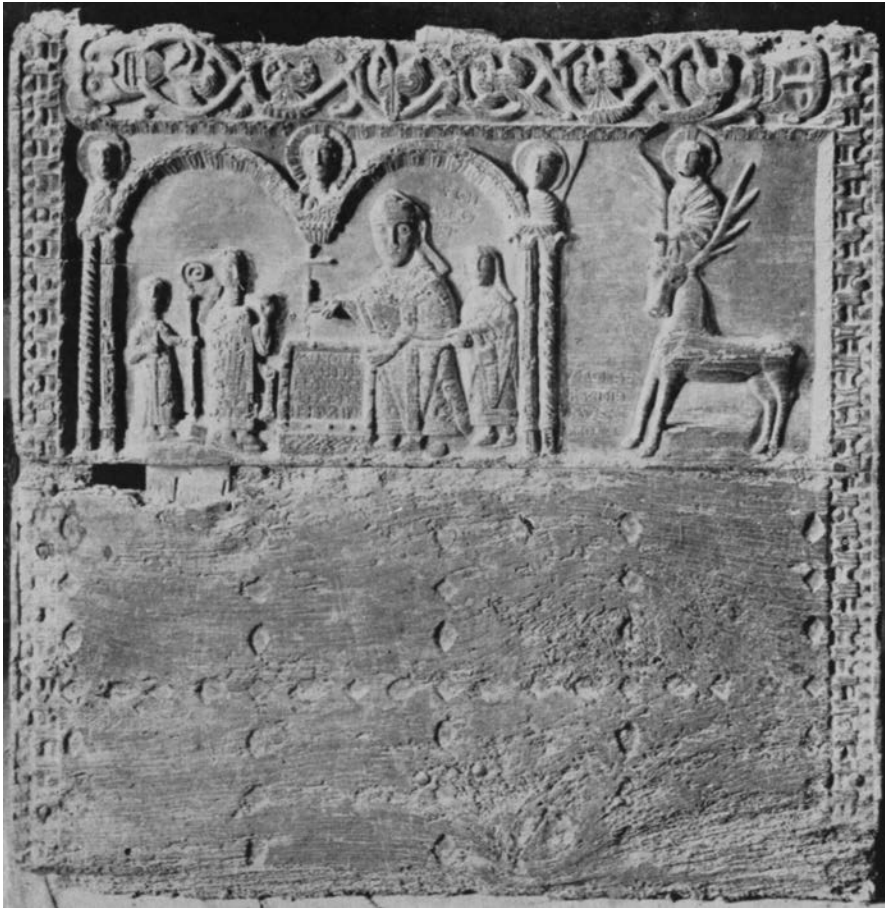
There may be a simple and practical explanation for Kircher's effort to connect the origin of the church to Constantine: He needed to raise money for the restoration of his "discovery," and to this end the *Historia Eustachio-Mariana* served as an exhortation to invest. Patrons were the recipients of the book and also the reason for writing it, enrolled as part of a lavish promotion campaign that completely reinvented Lauro's simple "gift copy."⁴⁴ And Kircher succeeded to an astonishing degree. Illustrious contacts seemed to outbid each other in funding the repairs at Mentorella. The Holy Roman emperor, Leopold I, gave the considerable sum of 1,200 Roman scudi; Duke August of Brunswick-Lüneburg gave 400 scudi; the elector of Bavaria 400 scudi; the viceroy of Naples offered 100 scudi, and Count Johann Friedrich Waldstein 700 scudi. Maria Theresa, the empress of Austria-Hungary, gave a precious

silver-embroidered mantle, which she had made herself, to cloak the statue of the Holy Virgin.⁴⁵ As late as 1670 a letter from Cardinal Giovanni Conti offers an annual sum of 6 scudi for the maintenance of the church, a gesture that filled Kircher with “unspeakable cheerfulness and jubilation.”⁴⁶ The residents of the neighboring community helped finance Kircher’s restorations as well.

It is remarkable that such a glittering assembly of royalty and nobles came to give as much as a thought to the small sanctuary in the remote mountains of Lazio. But Kircher had provided for the church a past designed to attract donors. A fresco inscription inside the church, dated 1665, made Emperor Leopold’s money seem well worth spent – in fact his donations bought him a piece of freshly fabricated history: “Constantinus Magnus Imp. extruxit – Leopoldus I Rom. Imp. . . . instauravit” was the inscription’s candid message, which thus forged a link between the two emperors in architecture, be it ever so small and remote. Clearly, the “Constantine connection” helped Kircher attract donations as effectively as it had served Lauro fifty years earlier in luring money from Ranuccio Farnese to cover the expenses for Book III of *Antiquae Urbis Splendor*.

Kircher scholars have never questioned nor discussed his early dating of the church and consequently have missed the opportunity of witnessing the art historian Kircher at his most creative. For his attempts to argue his case are primarily based on visual evidence, even though the first two chapters of his book take the form of an historical examination. The first chapter presents a general survey of the ecclesiastical buildings carried out by Constantine, based on Baronio’s *Annales Ecclesiasticae*, but with no mention of S. Maria. Proceeding to the next chapter, promisingly titled “On the first Church to the Mother of God in Monte Vulturella founded by Constantine,” the reader only gradually realizes that he or she will just have to take the Jesuit Father’s word for it that Constantine erected the church and that Sylvester I consecrated it on the spot of Saint Eustace’s conversion. Kircher is honest enough to admit the total lack of inscriptions that might have documented the actual intervention of Constantine, both in Mentorella and in other churches, but is quick to explain this absence of evidence by asserting the emperor’s pious modesty and a spirit that humbly conceded all glory to God alone.⁴⁷

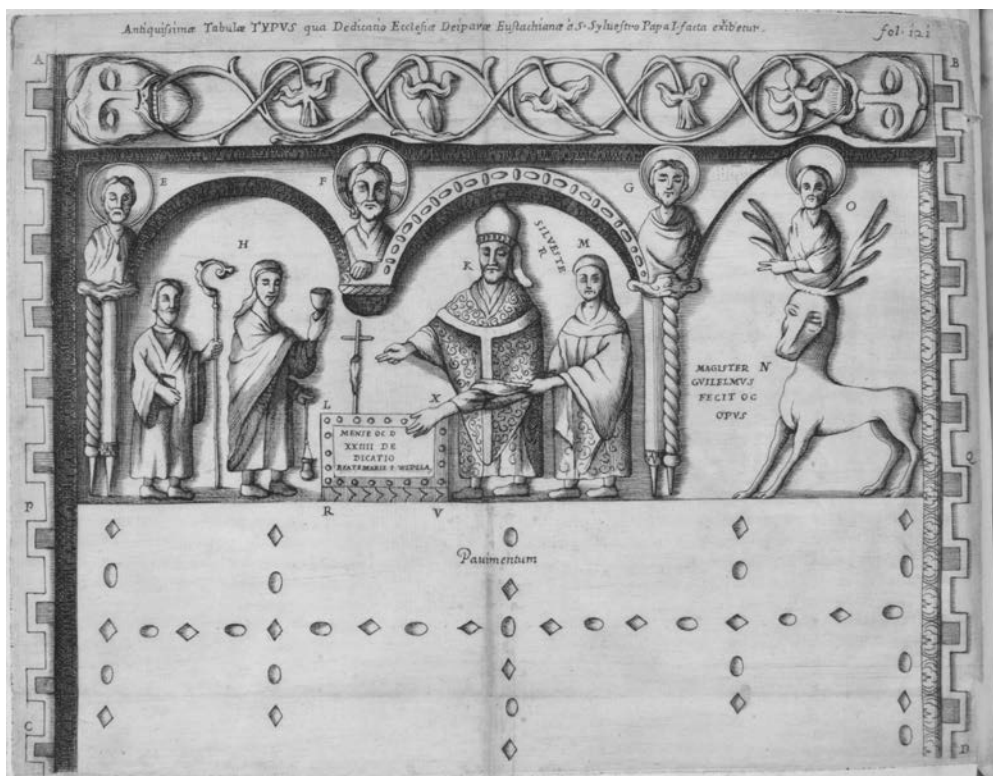
On the whole his historical argument fails to convince. Nowhere does his much-used source, Baronio, connect the early Christian emperor to S. Maria in Mentorella. Indeed, no one before Kircher had linked the church to Constantine.⁴⁸ So without much historical support, except the rather irrelevant passages from Baronio, the reader turns with expectation to Kircher’s handling of his main evidence for the Constantine origin – a single work of art, a wooden relief. Indeed Kircher musters all his resources to wrestle from it the meaning he suspects it has. The relief, which Kircher found somewhere inside the church without reporting its exact location, measures 122 × 120 cm



84. Oak relief originally belonging to S. Maria in Mentorella, thirteenth century. Photograph from Attilio Rossi, *Santa Maria in Vulturella* (Rome, 1905).

and is carved in oak wood (Fig. 84). It is divided into two parts of almost equal size. The upper part depicts Pope Sylvester I, flanked by assistants, in the act of consecrating the primordial church, and a second scene represents the stag appearing before Saint Eustace with the image of Christ between its horns.

The lower part of the relief is altogether different. It consists of a simple division into eight squares by rows of oval and diamond-shaped holes. Rossi found traces of a reddish substance in these holes, which he argued served to fix gems and precious stones that were once inserted, and thought it was originally placed in front of the main altar, because altars of the period were of the approximate size of this relief.⁴⁹ Whereas Cascioli dated the oak panel to around 1270, based on the signature on the work (“Magister Guilielmus”), Rossi was less precise; on the basis of stylistic comparison with works done in Abruzzo and Lazio, he dated it to between 1150 and 1250.⁵⁰ In contrast, Kircher dates it to the time of Constantine without the slightest hesitation. It is comparable



85. Athanasius Kircher, representation of the oak relief with the “floor plan” of the church. *Historia Eustachio-Mariana* (Rome, 1665), folio between pp. 120 & 121. British School at Rome Library, 489.9.EUS.1.1.

to the reliefs found on the Arch of Constantine, he writes, which he “cannot admire enough whenever he passes by it.” But instead of supporting his claim, he relies on Baronio’s description of the arch and agrees with the venerated historian that the scarcity of architects and sculptors in Rome in Constantine’s period required the calling in of a workforce from Africa and other remote areas for the decoration of churches. For Kircher this sufficiently accounts for the “disproportionate symmetry” he finds demonstrated in the Mentorella relief, sculpted by unskilled craftsmen untrained in this kind of work.⁵¹

Having dated the relief itself to Roman times, Kircher interprets it so as to provide evidence for Constantine’s involvement with the church (Fig. 85). First of all, the twisted columns framing the image of Pope Sylvester convinced Kircher that the early sanctuary featured such columns, which, significantly, were similar to the ones that could be seen in the old S. Peter’s erected by the emperor.⁵² But the most striking interpretation he offers concerns the lower part of the relief, with its simple division into decorative square shapes. For Kircher this part represents nothing less than the plan of Constantine’s church at Mentorella: “[A]nd moreover, with the quadrant image which can

be seen, the sculptor, in a rough manner, wished to produce nothing other than the floor [*pavimentum*] of the church.”⁵³ It is difficult to know how Kircher envisaged a church built according to such a plan. If the gem-shaped holes were to represent columns, a row of them would inconveniently run along the middle of the nave. Alternatively, the plan could simply outline the floor decorations, which would conform more to Kircher’s use of the word “*pavimentum*.”

Thus the true nature of Kircher’s “reconstruction” at Mentorella has been uncovered. He restored a modest building, but more importantly he carefully constructed its idea, offering an ideal but lost prototype. Kircher believed that the image of the edifice he found delineated in the wooden relief enshrined all the evidence of the building’s Constantinian appearance. The relief thus offered a nucleus generating an ideal plan and interior, whose actual realization was prevented only by the existing building. Joscelyn Godwin is clearly wrong to conclude that Kircher at Mentorella showed an interest in the Middle Ages, because he did not.⁵⁴ The medieval church was precisely what he tried to backdate to late antiquity and to present to his patrons as the very embodiment of the Holy Roman Empire, radiating with the aura of Constantine’s rule when “holy” also meant “Roman.”

In this way the oak-wood panel emerges as a symbol. It represented for Kircher a codification of his myth of origin on which he exerted an emblematic interpretation. Through an act of “decoding” he was able to translate its decorative squares into an antique floor plan. Endowed with new meaning the relief now communicated ideas that otherwise would remain hidden, connecting a remote church to the great Basilica of S. Peter’s, and a shadowy origin to Constantine himself and to the early, pregnant times of Christianity. The double-layered conception that Kircher demonstrates in his presentation of S. Maria – as not only material appearance but also as a signpost in a grandly developed Christian tale – ties him to Lauro (and Bayam) in their common outlook on antiquity. For the things they shared went deeper than the occasional patron or publisher and were based in that underlying historical vision expounded by Baronio. Whenever the history of Roman antiquity entered his argument, Kircher too picked up the cardinal’s *Annales Ecclesiastici*. The idea of divine providence kept both antiquarians steadfast in the belief that Roman antiquity unfolded by the dictate of an omnipotent Christian God.

The countryside around Tivoli was for Kircher a place where he hunted for signs and also where he made them up. The careful construction of an architectural origin in *Historia Eustachio-Mariana* prepared for the making of *Latium*’s two elaborate villa reconstructions, planned during the same outing and published a few years later. The Mentorella example shows a reconstruction performed in reverse or, alternatively, from the outside in: He does not reconstruct the form of an ancient site – rather he reconstructs an ancient origin to an existing form. Unfounded but with the force of a revelation,

a mythical past is unveiled beyond – or within – the material dimension. Kircher approaches antiquity with a nerve and actuality quite absent in Lauro's slightly academic exercises. Even though Kircher's conclusions occasionally set back research for years or even centuries, they were born not out of ill will, but out of a desire to recombine a fragmented reality and create a synthesis between the real and the possible. As he continued to explore the region in text and images, I argue that he began to plan a retreat even more remote than Mentorella, namely in the Roman past itself.

KIRCHER'S VILLA OF MAECENAS

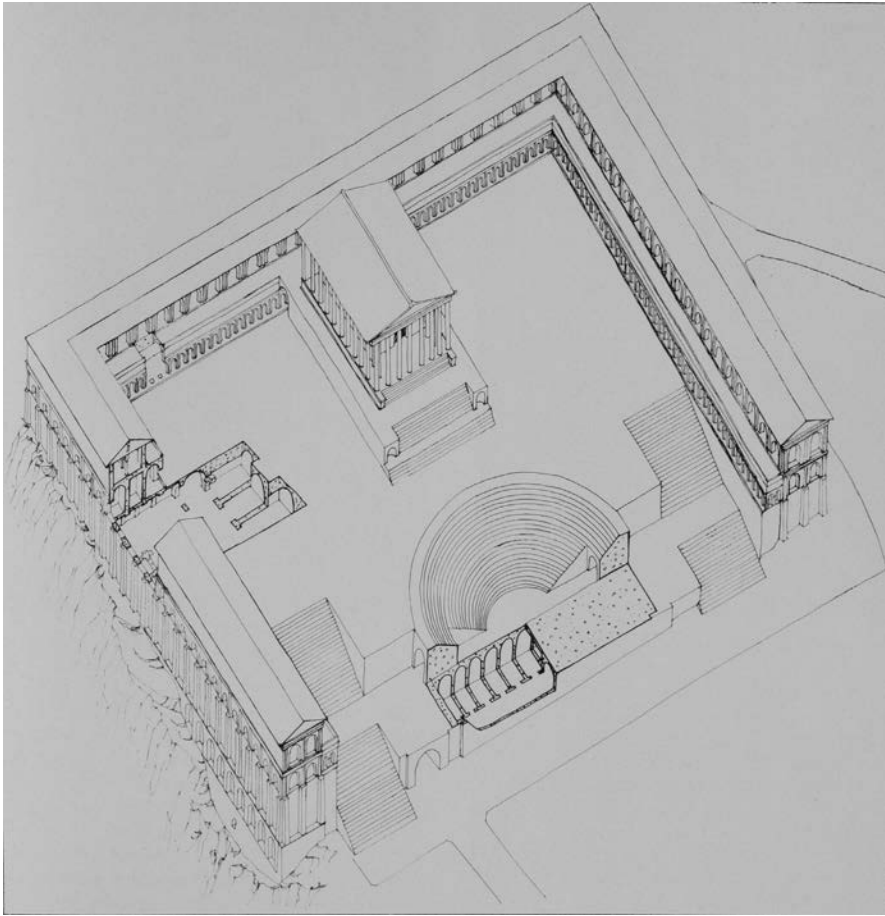
The complex Kircher recognized as the Villa of Maecenas was in the nineteenth century identified as the Temple of Hercules Victor.⁵⁵ Kircher was well aware that a temple with this name also existed in the vicinity of Tivoli, and he even made a reconstruction of it based on Andrea Fei's *Ritratto di Roma antica* published in 1627, as I mentioned in Chapter 1. The wealth of ideas he had for a "Villa of Maecenas," however, made the ruins a very convenient site and the switching of locations, most likely, quite deliberate.

He would have encountered the ruins he believed to be the villa in more or less the same state as one sees them today: A vast artificial platform, measuring 155 × 119 meters, was built into the hillside on the western slopes of Tivoli, adjacent to the Villa d'Este. Remains of the immense sanctuary include arched porticoes on three sides and a centrally placed podium projecting from the back colonnade, once holding a peripteral temple (Fig. 86).⁵⁶ In the first half of the sixteenth century, Antonio da Sangallo the Younger referred to the site as the Villa of Volpiscus.⁵⁷ Pirro Ligorio, toward the end of that century, stated that the complex was the villa of Emperor Augustus,⁵⁸ and Giovanni Zappi gave the same attribution in his *Annali e Memorie di Tivoli* written in the 1570s,⁵⁹ both elaborating on a connection to Augustus found in Suetonius's account of Augustus's life (2.72.). But Suetonius claimed that the emperor only visited the site occasionally. Therefore, Antonio Del R , in 1611, wrote more cautiously that, because Augustus supposedly came to Tivoli for recreation, "some gave into the idea that this villa was by Augustus"⁶⁰ Others came to believe that Maecenas, Augustus's friend and patron of the arts, had made the emperor the inheritor of the villa. Thus, the historian Francesco Marzi stated in 1665: "By inheritance, therefore, the sumptuous Villa of Maecenas in Tivoli passed on to Augustus."⁶¹ In fact, for the second edition of Marzi's *Historia*, Kircher wrote a preface praising the author's erudition and knowledge of Tivoli. Indeed, he adopts Marzi's view, believing the villa first belonged to Maecenas and later to Augustus.⁶² Thus, Kircher secures the most glorious provenance imaginable for the remains he was going to transform into one of the visual highlights of late Baroque reconstructions, and that I call the "Villa of Maecenas" in accord with opinions at the time.⁶³

It was difficult for the period's historians to form an idea of the site; a building platform and a few scattered stones yielded little information on the architectural form.⁶⁴ Giovanni Zappi responded thus to the sixteenth-century appearance of the villa: "I tell you that when one looks at that big structure, its vastness leaves man's intellect all confused."⁶⁵ Pirro Ligorio was among the first to attempt a systematic investigation of the remains in and around Tivoli, famously investigating the remains of Hadrian's villa in the 1550s and 1560s.⁶⁶ Ligorio also reported his finds, and three distinct versions exist of his descriptions of Hadrian's villa and other villas in the area.⁶⁷ Although none of the three versions was published, several copies were made after Ligorio's death, and some included passages on the Villa of Maecenas. The account of the villa in Ligorio's revised and enlarged version of "Antichità Romane," now preserved in Turin, is the most complete.⁶⁸ In addition to the text, this version also contains three drawings of the monument: a reconstructed plan of the entire site, a plan of a part of the substructure, and a reconstructed elevation of the northwest façade. A set of very similar drawings, also by Ligorio, were acquired by Kircher's friend and early mentor, Cassiano dal Pozzo, to be included in his famous Paper Museum.⁶⁹

Like Lauro before him, Kircher refers extensively to Ligorio, and he also relied on Ligorio's description of the villa, but he does not state from which manuscript(s) he knew it. Perhaps he saw the "Antichità Romane" itself in Turin, which was available for consultation at the time, although Kircher was hardly one to have traveled far to check up on facts.⁷⁰ He may also have accessed a partial copy of it made for Queen Christina of Sweden, whom he corresponded with and met on several occasions.⁷¹ Still, his most likely source was not a manuscript at all, but an extract from Ligorio's "Descrittione" quoted in Antonio Del Rè's *Dell' antichità Tiburtine* published in 1611, a book Kircher refers to in *Latium*.⁷² This extract contained all the references to the Villa of Maecenas that he would later use and saved the busy scholar from tedious archive research. The fact that he does not credit Del Rè's book in the particular chapter on the villa does not mean that he ignored it; on the contrary, as I have pointed out throughout, the sources that Lauro and Kircher directly relied on are those they tended to leave unmentioned.

It is therefore bold of Father Kircher to contest Ligorio's description and claim his own superior investigation: "Even though Ligorio has amply described this villa, I have nearly for a whole year, as soon the occasion rose to go to Tivoli, examined these ruins with a most careful mind. It is up to the reader to judge which of the two descriptions is the most truthful."⁷³ It takes some nerve to ask his readers to be the judge, because the question is not so much whether Kircher's examination is based on truth, but whether his account is based on any examination at all. Given that the text quotes Del Rè, or rather Del Rè quoting Ligorio, the Jesuit's analysis fails to provide any evidence of his own, independent observation. That is to say, Kircher's



86. Reconstruction of the Temple of Hercules Victor in Tivoli ("Villa of Maecenas"). Drawing by Cairolì Fulvio Giuliani published in *Tibur: pars prima* (Rome, 1970). Courtesy of De Luca Editori.

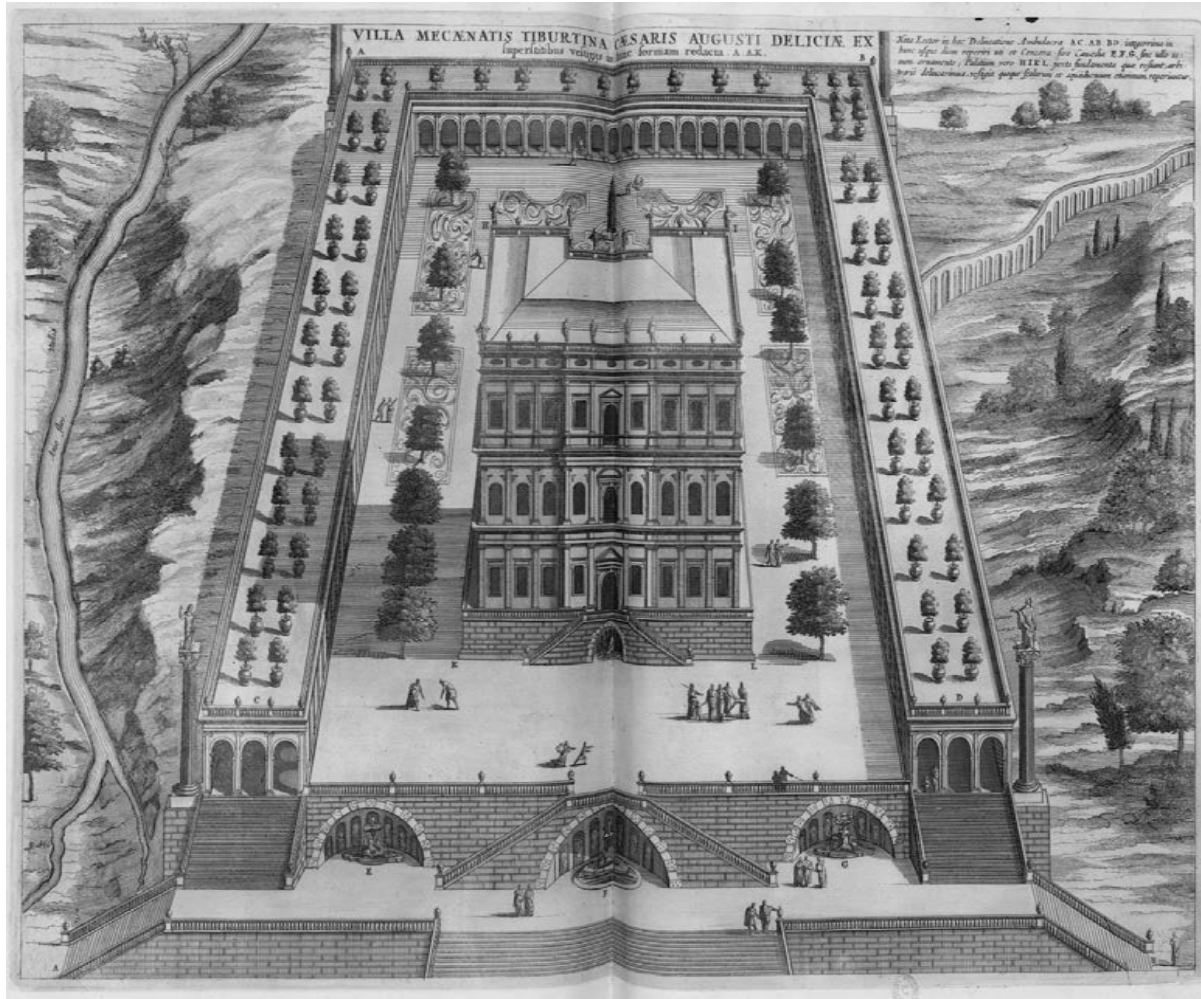
account offers no information on the site that did not already appear in the source he had at hand. After having mentioned the huge supporting platform, he proceeds to described the colonnade that formed its perimeters, and the rooms and halls it contained, and then the podium in the middle, imagining the edifice that must have stood on top of it, before he makes a note of the fountains and niches carved into the terraces – in an account that overall seems to add another layer to a literary evocation of the place.⁷⁴ Kircher might be seen to provide a reconstruction on an altogether different level in the sense that he translates Ligorio's original Italian into Latin. The vernacular assumes the guise of an ancient text – a restitution in reverse – offering perhaps a linguistic parallel to Lauro's backdating of churches and villas to classical times.

It is for the illustration that Kircher reserves his reconstructive effort. The partly etched, partly engraved image of the villa extends over a double folio, measuring an impressive 342 × 440 mm (Fig. 87). It is a high-quality execution,

and the architectural design, from its imposing layout to decorative elements, would be worthy of any Roman architect's presentation drawing at the time. Although the architecture is decidedly Roman High Baroque and on stylistic grounds perhaps even datable to the classicist vogue of the 1630s and 1640s, no architect, not even an engraver, can be identified. Probably "hanc formam redacta A. A. K" stands for "represented by A[uthore] A[thanasio] K[ircher]," but Kircher as an author of images performed, as noted, a shadowy function in the making of the design. That said, the representation bears a typological resemblance to the villa in Milan, which Kircher sketched but did not visit. So did he visit Tivoli?

Previous to *Latium* several drawings and sketches had been made of the Villa of Maecenas – not only by Ligorio but also by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger and Andrea Palladio.⁷⁵ Kircher, to all accounts unaware of these drawings (which were neither published nor recorded to have been studied at the time), gave his visual imagination free rein. Not even the presence of elements he himself admitted were extant on the site stopped him from reinventing them entirely. For example, the podium in the middle of the courtyard was a remnant Kircher claimed to have studied, and yet his representation of it diverges not only from the remains but also from all previous architects' and historians' observations: First, instead of being joined to the colonnade at the far end, Kircher's podium stands freely in the middle of the open space; second, its size is greatly increased relative to the surrounding architecture; and last, two wings project from the rear of the structure, a strikingly novel addition. These differences are more than mere decorative variations, but concern, respectively, the position, proportion, and extension of a structure that Kircher himself said was extant. The claim to have examined the remains for a year and "with the greatest care" seems unfounded, and the journeys to Tivoli "as soon as the occasion rose" appear to have been imagined ones.

To Kircher, an enlarged and freestanding podium served a specific purpose: It was on top of this structure that he wanted a "vero palatium" to have existed, in a novel but not unique interpretation of the site. Ligorio had entertained a similar idea and called the central podium "Regia," whereas Sangallo the Younger had named it "Habitatione del Pri[n]cipi" (UA1208).⁷⁶ What is unique, however, is the graceful residence Kircher imagines once stood on the spot where now the sorry fundament was all that remained. Like the casino of the Villa Doria Pamphili, commissioned by Camillo Pamphili and completed in 1652, Kircher's slender building rises in three stories with the central part of the façade slightly projecting (Fig. 88). Details such as the broad decorated frieze, sculptures crowning the upper story, the balustrade, the pediments, as well as the elaborate parterres, also recall features from the Pamphili property. The engraving's systematization of the ruin's massive platform as a succession of terraces intercepted by stairs, niches, and sprouting



87. Athanasius Kircher, Villa of Maecenas, *Latium* (Amsterdam, 1671), folio between pp. 156 & 157. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, RES-J-1221.

fountains aligns the site to any seventeenth-century princely retreat in the Roman *campagna*. The double-ramped stairway, for example, with a central niche carved into it, dominates the garden façade of the Villa d'Este – the site's closest neighbor – and is a recurring motif in a number of renowned villas scattered across the Roman countryside. Of course, the solution printed in *Latium* is not how Vitruvius or Pliny the Younger had described antique villas, and Kircher, surprisingly perhaps, is the first to admit that he has departed from evidence and shown the villa “not as it was, but as it could and ought to have been.”⁷⁷ *Ought* – “debutit” – is an interesting moral correction of a past that one would think Kircher considered beyond his range of influence. But then again, to reconstruct, across epochs and disciplines, was in many respects Father Athanasius's mission in life – reinstating a fragmented reality to its lost, supreme world order. What set the particular reconstruction in Tivoli apart, however, was that he imagined himself, his friends, and patron playing a considerable part within it. Kircher had established the site's unmatched provenance, and he had authored an elegant habitation. The piece missing from the picture – namely someone who might have considered building it – is our next concern.

VIRI DOCTISSIMI

Kircher's literary production depended on the information he received from a network of letter writers. The part of his correspondence that is kept in the Archivio Pontificia Università Gregoriana contains two thousand letters from more than 763 correspondents. They represent different nationalities, faiths, and professions – from sovereigns to scientists – and in the context of this book confer on the arena of scholarship a legacy comparable to the one that Giovanni Alto left in tour guiding. A strict social hierarchy governs the organization of both autograph collections, with letters from high-ranking individuals, such as kings and emperors, coming first.⁷⁸ Although there is no evidence that the Swiss and the German met, they had friends in common, usually from the upper strata of society. For example, Two dukes – Gustav Adolf of Mecklenburg and Friedrich of Schleswig-Holstein – received gift copies of the Jesuit's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* and also visited Rome and signed up for guided tours with Alto.⁷⁹ A third duke, Johann Friedrich of Brunswick-Lüneburg (son of Kircher's friend and patron Duke August at Wolfenbüttel), corresponded with Kircher for decades and on one occasion even sent two crocodiles for the Jesuit's museum. When the duke himself came to Rome, he went sightseeing with Alto and left a greeting in the “Stammbuch” in 1644 and again in 1650 – “la seconda volta che sono stato in Roma.”⁸⁰ This second time was probably also when he met Kircher, as recorded by the Jesuit Father, and had the conversations that led to his conversion to Catholicism in 1651.



88. Giovanni Battista Falda, view of the side façade and gardens of the Villa Doria Pamphili, 1675. Engraving by Simone Felice. © 2015. Christie's Images, London/Scala, Florence.

And on the subject of guiding, Kircher, like Alto, also offered tours: “My gallery or Museum is visited by all the nations of the world,” he writes of his *wunderkammer* that was filled with exotica from all continents.⁸¹ We do not know if the collection was a regular stop on Alto’s itinerary; in any case it invited a “journey” of its own, with Kircher as cicerone.⁸²

It is Kircher himself who evokes the term “Republic of Letters.”⁸³ To the extent he participated in this Europe-wide, correspondence-based network of learning, it was through the French antiquarian and collector, Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, whom Kircher first met in Aix in October 1632.⁸⁴ At this point the young Jesuit was a refugee from his own country, which had been invaded by the Swedes, and had published his first book, the *Ars Magnesia* (*The Art of Magnetism*) the year before. Peiresc took an immediate interest in the young scholar and continued to support him even after he exposed his protégé’s fraudulent attempt to interpret the hieroglyphs of the Lateran obelisque.⁸⁵ Instead he persistently encouraged him to refine his knowledge and discipline his research.⁸⁶ The Frenchman regarded correspondence almost as a transcendent aim in itself and propagated a form of archaeology that was conditioned on the sharing of material and discoveries. It was within his “invisible, Europe-wide college of savants” that Peiresc initially gave a position to Kircher, who quickly learned the value of exchanging information – also of an architectural kind – via letters.⁸⁷ For example, one contact sent reports on ancient remains he had discovered near Ferento, whereas on other occasions it was Kircher who inquired about material, such as the letter he sent to Cardinal Giovanni de Medici in which he asked for drawings of palaces and public monuments in Florence.⁸⁸

But the “Republic of Letters,” however widely one defines that term, would also appear too “democratic” for Kircher’s taste. For the old world scholar, continuously on the lookout for hidden meanings and signs of divine wisdom, it must have been taxing to be exposed to a breed of progressive and specialized thinkers and scientists. Many of Kircher’s ideas saw the light of day *because* he kept to himself. Better suited to his ideals of sharing knowledge, as Nick Wilding points out, was the worldwide network of informants already existing within the Society of Jesus, and the material Kircher published is to a surprisingly large degree based on letters and reports from missionaries that he either read as they came in or looked up in the archives of the Collegio Romano.⁸⁹ In more profound opposition to the basics of the “Republic of Letters” was Kircher’s allegiance to esoteric tradition, as Noel Malcolm significantly points out. The kind of subjects Kircher dealt in were insights, enigmas, and epiphanies that by nature thrived in enclosed environs. The reference was ultimately to the idea of a graded and highly controlled revelation of sacred knowledge passing from ancient Egypt through to select “philosopher-kings.”⁹⁰ The Jesuit’s ideal of sharing information was more elitist and hierarchical than the free flow and transparency expected by the subscribers to Peiresc’s scholarship-by-post. A much tighter circle of intellectuals would suit Athanasius, and it was precisely to such a group he was introduced when he came to Rome.

With the collector, art lover, and papal nephew, Cardinal Francesco Barberini, as a powerful figurehead, this group displayed, in addition to an antiquarian interest, a religious devotion or at least a connection to the Catholic Church that appealed to Kircher. Foremost among the antiquarians in the Barberini circle was Cassiano dal Pozzo, arguably Rome’s leading antiquarian in the seventeenth century and the founder of the *Museo Cartaceo* – the Paper Museum – an enormous archive of drawings that included series of Roman antiquities comparable in size and ambition only to Ligorio’s “*Antichità Romane*.”⁹¹ It was to Cassiano that Peiresc entrusted young Kircher with a glowing recommendation.⁹² Because they both lived in Rome, they naturally found ample occasion to meet in person, and even so a small number of letters between them are extant.⁹³ Possibly Kircher also consulted drawings in the Paper Museum, but in the end he, like Lauro, showed little interest in copying antiquarian material from drawings and manuscripts. Even when the collection held outstanding material, such as Cassiano’s series of watercolors made after the famous Roman Nile mosaic in Palestrina, Kircher preferred to reproduce the mosaic from previous prints.⁹⁴ Among the architectural folios in the collection were drawings of ancient architecture (mostly reconstructions) by Giovanni Battista Montano, Antonio Labacco, and Ligorio.⁹⁵ That Kircher never reused this material, nor even Ligorio’s fabulous drawings of the “Villa of Maecenas,” confirms an agenda that was non-archaeological and highlights, too, the distinctly different levels on which seventeenth-century paper antiquarianism was conducted: Obviously the copying of drawings and

manuscripts would threaten to puncture the carefully constructed Rome ideologies of papal antiquarians with the disturbing minutiae of observation. *Publishing* authors like Lauro and Kircher would always have to distill and retouch information to navigate it through Roman censorship, which made paper antiquarianism in print an entirely different exercise from the private, unrestricted wallowing in remnants afforded by nonpublishing connoisseurs like Peiresc and Cassiano. Cassiano's Paper Museum reaffirms the authority Ligorio still held in a circle of mid-seventeenth-century antiquarians, but as *Antiquae Urbis Splendor* already demonstrated, it was an authority also deliberately undermined because the Neapolitan's designs invited variations more than blueprints in response to new demands.⁹⁶

Another prominent figure with whom Kircher became involved almost immediately after arriving in Rome was the German convert Lucas Holsten (Holstenius). The eminent bibliophile and scholar on manuscripts on antiquities was appointed head of the Vatican Library in 1653.⁹⁷ But as early as 1637 the two Germans traveled to Sicily and Malta as chaperones of the young German landgrave Friedrich of Hessen-Darmstadt.⁹⁸ Holsten also helped Kircher negotiate deals with international booksellers for the distribution of the Jesuit's books.⁹⁹ Joseph Maria Suarès, historian and author, and from 1633 also bishop of Vaison (in southern France), was also an early friend: In *Latium* Kircher acknowledges the assistance of Suarès, praising the bishop's superior knowledge on the subject of Palestrina, and he makes extensive use of illustrations from Suarès's *Praenestes Antiquae Libri Duo* published in 1655.¹⁰⁰ They also corresponded and spent time together studying architecture, visiting "all the obelisks, pyramids and various statues."¹⁰¹ Importantly, Cassiano, Holsten, and Suarès were more than scholars; they were also good Catholics (including a convert and a bishop) and were among those who formed the circle of *letterati* that inspired Kircher's erudite, didactic antiquarianism. They were peers whose books and material he could consult and whom he could call on in person. The model that best embraced Kircher's ideal of sharing, then, would therefore not be an invisible Republic of Letters, but a House of Scholars.

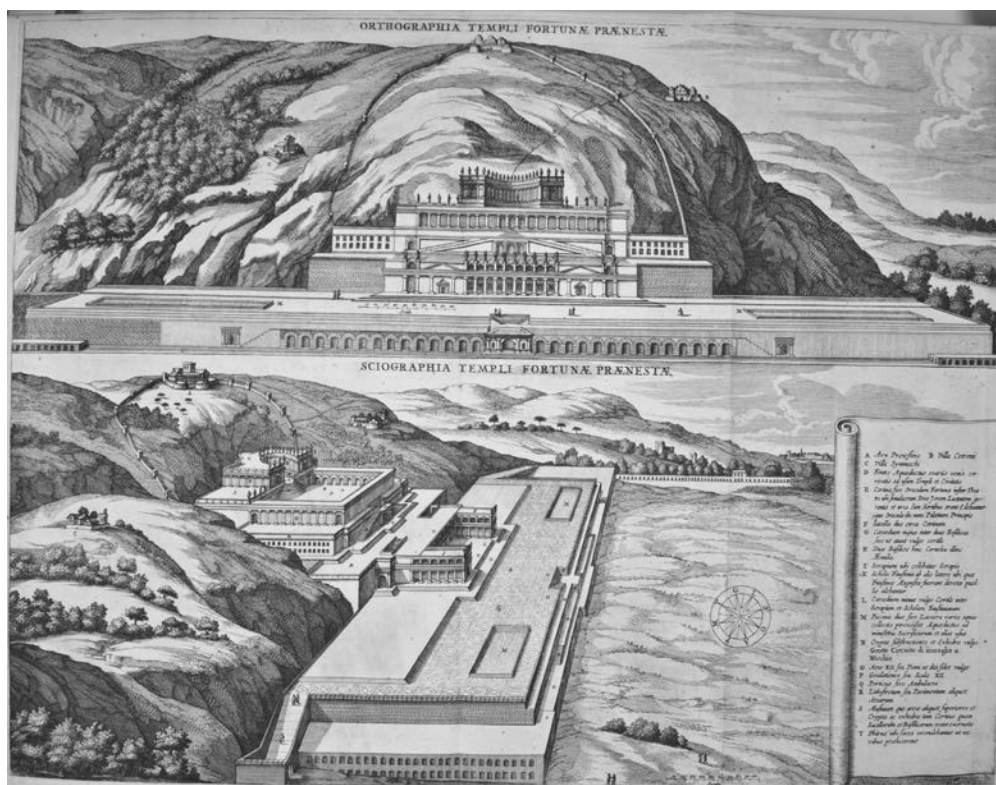
Not surprisingly, it was Francesco Barberini who emerged as the "philosopher king," assembling these learned ones in an informal court.¹⁰² Some of them had already become acquainted through the Accademia dei Lincei, founded by the aristocrat (and also Lauro's correspondent) Federico Cesi. To this fellowship, aimed at the systematic organization and spreading of scientific knowledge, Cassiano was elected a member in 1622 and Francesco Barberini in 1623; Suarès, too, appears to have been an early member.¹⁰³

Six weeks after Maffeo Barberini was elected pope on August 6, 1623, taking the name Urban VIII, his nephew Francesco was elected cardinal, and the cardinal, in turn, gave his friends positions. He placed Cassiano in the significant post of *maestro di camera* – his chief chamberlain; Lucas Holsten was entrusted with the task of building up a family library and began copying

Ligorio manuscripts for the cardinal who planned to publish them.¹⁰⁴ Suarès, whom Barberini had met in 1625 in Avignon, was commissioned to write the history of ancient Palestrina, the town Barberini had acquired from the Colonnas in 1630.¹⁰⁵ Not surprisingly therefore – and on the advice of both Cassiano and Peiresc – Barberini also took Kircher under his protection when he arrived in Rome in November 1633.¹⁰⁶ The workload he gave the young German was so heavy that Peiresc worried his protégé would be left with no time to complete the transcription of two Coptic manuscripts that the two of them had agreed he should do.¹⁰⁷ For Francesco gave Kircher a task he was unable to resist when he set him to interpret the hieroglyphs of an obelisk brought to the Palazzo Barberini in 1632. The cardinal paid for the required drawings to be made¹⁰⁸ and arranged for the manuscript to be published by the press of the Congregation of the Propagation of Faith.¹⁰⁹ Not surprisingly, it was to Francesco that Kircher dedicated the book when it came out in 1636 with the title *Prodromus Coptus sive Aegyptiacus* (*Coptic or Egyptian Forerunner*), asserting that only through the “patronage” of the cardinal had it been possible to restore the obelisk’s lost meaning.¹¹⁰ For his next book, the *Magnes sive de Arte Magnetica* of 1641, the cardinal let him study exotic and rare plants in his botanical collection.¹¹¹

As for *Latium*, Francesco Barberini assisted the Jesuit on a range of issues, which included architectural reconstructions. In fact, the constancy of his support might enable us in the end to decipher the enigmatic design of the Villa of Maecenas. But first, concerning the Villa of Hadrian, he granted Kircher access to his library so that he could consult Ligorio’s description and also urged him to include a survey of the villa commissioned by the cardinal himself from Francesco Contini in the 1630s.¹¹² For *Latium*, too, he gave Kircher permission to reproduce – and also paid for – the first complete engraved representation of the famous Nile mosaics, returned and reinstalled in the ancient sanctuary in Palestrina on the order of Barberini himself.¹¹³ This we know from the engraving’s ornate cartouche, which contains Kircher’s grateful thanks to the cardinal. It was, in fact, in Palestrina that the two met by chance in 1664, a delighted Francesco taking Athanasius on a guided tour of the family property. In *Latium* Kircher tells of this reunion and praises the cardinal for having encouraged and facilitated his archaeological investigations and promoted his studies for more than thirty years. In fact, he credits the cardinal with establishing his fame – “cognita mei adventus causa.”¹¹⁴ If there were anyone in Kircher’s Rome who emerged as a successor to Maecenas – that ancient patron of the arts, it was Francesco Barberini.

Latium includes not only representations of the Nile mosaics but also a reconstruction of the Temple of Fortuna Primigenia where the mosaics originally were installed – a large hillside complex dating from the second century BC (Fig. 89). Not unlike the remnants of the Villa of Maecenas, it ascended in a pyramid of broad ramps toward a summit where the temple itself had stood



89. Reconstruction of the Temple of Fortuna Primigenia in Kircher's *Latium* (Amsterdam, 1671), folio between pp. 96 & 97. Engraving based on a design by Pietro da Cortona originally published in Joseph Maria Suarès, *Praenestes Antiquae Libri Duo* (Rome, 1655). British School at Rome Library, L.691.Laz.6.

until it was replaced by medieval and Renaissance structures. The precinct, and indeed the entire town, had belonged to the Colonna family for centuries when in 1630 the Barberini family acquired Palestrina, together with the princely title that came with it – eager to establish a dynastic basis for their clan and more concretely to create a country retreat that reflected their new social standing. No one in the seventeenth century believed the ancient precinct to have been a villa, but the new owners most likely planned to turn it into one. Although it was Francesco's brother Taddeo Barberini – now prince of Palestrina – who formally owned the place, Francesco took a particular interest in the ancient temple and commissioned Pietro da Cortona to produce a detailed reconstruction of the precinct. The proposal exists in a series of drawings executed in 1630–31, and it was published in 1655 in Suarès's book on Palestrina, from where Kircher copied it for inclusion in *Latium*.¹¹⁵ The likely answer to why Francesco commissioned this new proposal from Cortona, when he already owned drawings of the reconstructed site made for Federico Cesi in 1614, reveals the extent of his ambition. The Cesi drawings (loosely based on a Ligorio project) express a painstaking attempt to comprehend and

systematize the vestiges, amounting to a true reconstruction, in sharp contrast to Cortona's sweeping scheme that ignores the particulars of archaeology.¹¹⁶ Jörg Martin Merz especially, but also others, are convinced that Cortona's plans were made with the intent to build a Barberini villa on top of the remains that would match and surpass the princely villas built by, for example, the Farnese at Caprarola and Aldobrandini in Frascati.¹¹⁷ The Barberini owned no such sumptuous country dwelling, and the striking scheme accorded well with the cardinal's interest in ancient Roman sites and possibly signaled his takeover of Palestrina from Taddeo who we know aimed for more prestigious fiefdoms.¹¹⁸

But as it turned out Taddeo not only remained in Palestrina but he also began to rebuild the place, although not on Cortona's scale.¹¹⁹ That Francesco's plans came to naught may explain why he at this point shifted his focus to Tivoli – and to the particular site of the Villa of Maecenas. In 1612 the property had been acquired by the Camera Apostolica, an institution that was really controlled by the pope and his family.¹²⁰ Though this date, of course, preceded any Barberini intervention, documentation of the owners is lacking until 1795, which suggests that the property in due time passed into Barberini control. An occasion for actual building emerges with the fact that Francesco Barberini held the governorship of Tivoli from 1624 to 1632, and again from 1634 to 1644; in the intervening years the position was held by his brother Antonio.¹²¹ Evidence suggests that Francesco initially sought the governorship solely to acquire the Villa d'Este with its spectacular gardens; this was a possibility following from the will of Ippolito d'Este, stating that the villa would pass to the dean of the College of Cardinals (Apostolic chamber) in the case that no member of the d'Este family held a cardinal's hat.¹²² The ambiguity and continuous disputes over ownership arising from this clause were settled once and for all in 1626 in favor of the d'Este family.¹²³ Even with the Villa d'Este definitely beyond reach, Francesco Barberini did not abandon his position in Tivoli. On the contrary, he held onto the governorship for nearly another twenty years. The prolongation of office set the stage for new, grand architectural plots, I argue, because it indicates Barberini's continued interest in a town where he always had coveted some property or another. At some point, the vast complex adjacent to Villa d'Este must have caught his imagination.

The temple sites in Palestrina and Tivoli appeared similar with their magnificent hillside location, their terraced structure, and ancient origin. The "Villa of Maecenas" would have proved perhaps even more tempting by virtue of its smaller scale and alleged identity as a villa, with an unmatched provenance. The question is, of course, whether Kircher's print represents, or even reflects, a likely project for building. What *can* be said is that Francesco Barberini showed an unusual interest in having reconstructed villas engraved. When Kircher in *Latium* dedicated the book's fold-out plan of Hadrian's villa to "the very eminent Cardinal Francesco Barberini," it was an appropriate gesture not

only because the cardinal had commissioned Contini to make the survey for this plan but also because he had paid for the copperplates on which Baldassare Moroni engraved it and from which prints were pulled in 1668.¹²⁴ Barberini was equally determined to have Cortona's Palestrina reconstruction printed. In a first attempt, a copper engraving was produced at the cardinal's expense by Sebastiano Fulcaro in 1638. It was meant to furnish Suarès's lavish book on Palestrina, a book that was delayed when the author was appointed bishop and left for France.¹²⁵ The death of Urban VIII in 1644 put a stop to most Barberini projects, with the family forced into exile by an unforgiving Pope Innocence X Pamphili. The Palestrina project, however, was not forgotten, and with the Barberini again in favor under Alexander VII, Suarès submitted a final version of his manuscript in 1655. Although the publication now was more modest than originally intended, the cardinal insisted on the inclusion of a new series of prints after Cortona's project – an elevation, a plan, and a view – engraved by Domenico Castelli. The prints were, not surprisingly, “made possible only through the generosity of Cardinal Francesco Barberini,” according to Suarès.¹²⁶ The Fulcaro and Castelli prints are examples of the cardinal's extraordinary and specific intervention in the process of realizing engraved reconstructions. That these in addition were villa schemes in Lazio makes him, conceivably, a key player in the making of *Latium's* “Villa of Maecenas.”

Suarès's prints could shed light on Kircher's mysterious *Villa of Maecenas* as a building project. In light of such a hypothesis, the reconstruction published in *Latium* – if compared to Castelli's – represents the last stage in the evolution of an architectural project conceived years, even decades earlier, and in the final instance never executed. The fact that Cortona's proposal for a Barberini mansion was published twenty years late, in a book on ancient Palestrina, makes it less incredulous that a Tiburtine project, by an unknown architect, reappeared in Kircher's history of Lazio. Lastly, and very speculatively, if the Jesuit's design represents what was once a real scheme for Francesco Barberini, Kircher may have obtained the original drawings, now lost, from the cardinal around the time they met in 1664.

It is, of course, untenable to conclude that Francesco Barberini planned to rebuild the site of Maecenas's villa based on Kircher's proposal. If that indeed had been the case, the project would probably be known to us in drawings or through other sources, but it is nevertheless an enticing thought: The stylish building, the site's provenance, the eager patron, and a real occasion converge in a tantalizing possibility indeed. Kircher's design would help fulfill seventeenth-century landowners' demand for instant translations of antiques into possible projects, throwing light on the calculated ambiguity and idealness of printed reconstructions. In the race for readership and ultimately for funding, an ancient villa had little chance of survival if not also as a potential future one: The fantasy Kircher creates may not be fantastical at all, but simply an unbuilt retreat.

A HOUSE OF SCHOLARS

Kircher denounces, as mentioned, Ligorio's outline of the villa and, strangely, also his attribution of it to Augustus. Why did he deny the property an imperial origin in favor of advancing its connection to the obviously less illustrious Maecenas? In the final instance the answer is to be found in the personal message around which he constructed the visual and textual account of the villa; like so many other illustrations in his books, the *Latium* reconstruction is also confined to a paper realm of wishful thinking.

The idea of the villa as a country retreat where artists and scholars could meet and converse is carefully reflected in the engraving (see Fig. 87). The human figures depicted might seem insignificant accessories, but the number of them actually amounts to thirty-four! They are all strolling in pairs or groups, in conversation with each other, perhaps exchanging ideas. "To Maecenas they came together in large numbers," Kircher writes in the text accompanying the image.¹²⁷ Kircher manifests architecturally, too, the function of Maecenas's villa as a gathering place for scholars. In this respect his deviation from previous authors' view is calculated indeed. Unlike Ligorio, Zappi, and Del R , Kircher does not situate the main dwelling space in the colonnade that surrounds the precinct, nor does he divide it into separate cubicles.¹²⁸ Instead he depicts the colonnade as a roofed but continuous open portico. It could be argued that the learned Jesuit thus wants to evoke a specific architectural type – the *stoa*. Such a structure was known to serve as the assembly place for some of the most important ancient Greek schools of philosophy. In fact, Kircher writes that to Maecenas's villa the learned came "as if to Zeno's Stoa or to the Aristotelian Peripatos" (the colonnade in the ancient Athenian Lyceum).¹²⁹ The notion of scholars gathering has thus been given an architectural expression.

The association to Maecenas was, of course, meant to remind the recipients of Kircher's books of the duty to support his literary production, but it also manifested Kircher's own ideal of intellectual exchange. On Maecenas's properties the learned had gathered and shared ideas in a set-up that harmonized with Kircher's attitude toward the distribution of knowledge. The villa evoked his ideal "House of Scholars."

In the learned community that such a house would represent, Francesco Barberini held a unique position. Reading Kircher's lengthy praise of Maecenas's role and importance in the text on the villa, one begins to wonder whether it is the past or some present patron he has in mind:

And since Maecenas had always been a of liberal and generous mind, especially towards writers, even the most learned men were attracted by his fame and flocked to him from all over. There he provided for them at his own expense, affluently and abundantly, and all they needed to do was to distinguish themselves in their work and enrich their field. Even

to this day, a man who is singularly liberal and generous towards writers is merited by being called “Maecenas” by those who pursue learning.¹³⁰

The passage offers the *dramatis personae* of patronage, and in the extension of that idea one could say that Kircher cast Barberini in the role of Maecenas and himself and his fellows in the roles of scholars “indulging in the arts and sciences each according to his talents.”¹³¹ It is no random association. Throughout *Latium* the author compliments the cardinal for advancing the arts and learning, something that made him unequaled in “Societatem nostrum” – our fellowship, Kircher says.¹³² Those who are especially beneficent toward writers, he continues, are called by the name of Maecenas – *even to this day* (my italics). Indeed, the circle of Cassiano, Suarès, and Kircher explicitly named the papal nephew Maecenas – as Suarès repeatedly writes: “Eminentissimum Cardinalem Barberinum Maecaenatem.”¹³³

In conclusion, Kircher’s villa reconstruction emerges as a carefully constructed celebration of the cardinal’s exceptional role as a patron, a role he for more than thirty years unfailingly fulfilled toward Kircher and other scholars. The idea of patronage, so closely tied to antiquarianism and print production, received in this print a poignant architectural emblem. Where Lauro had targeted patrons with dedications and gift copies, Kircher lifts the idea of patronage itself out of antiquity and presents it as an allegory in which his own immediate milieu is involuntarily engaged to give it meaning. More sophisticated than his predecessor, Kircher in this reconstruction connects his own scholarly needs and potential funders to the miraculously vacant remains in Tivoli where the archetypal sponsor once had lived and entertained. The message of Kircher’s lavish fold-out illustration makes it less important whether Francesco Barberini (or anyone else) in fact ever intended to construct a villa like the one Kircher proposed. More than a memento of a lost Barberini project, the print appears to have been an invitation, not necessarily to build but to act as benefactor.¹³⁴ It is a personal design in the respect that it closes in on dimensions important in Kircher’s own life, echoing the care and value he invested in the precinct at Mentorella. In between the many itineraries through space and time that Father Kircher authored within the walls of the Collegio Romano, he might have pictured himself in this Tiburtine country retreat, with all expenses covered and Cardinal Barberini perhaps as host. But like the many itineraries he drew up, the retreat, too, ultimately remained a paper-world fiction.